



CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES

Consumer kids

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ABSTRACT

Children of today are consumers at an earlier age than previous generations. The rapidly changing pace in our society regarding technology, information processing, transportation etc. makes it possible for them to experience purchasing and consumption at a rate much faster than that of their parents. Companies are also becoming more aware of children as important customers today, but also as brand loyal customers in the future. Children are influenced by marketing and opinions differ whether children should be viewed as competent or victimized consumers. Some argue that children learn to be consumers, while others emphasize a need for protection.

The debate regarding children and advertising has traditionally focused on products for the children's own use and has not sufficiently considered that children are exposed also to advertising directed to adults. For example, regulation of TV advertising refers to children's TV-programs exclusively. Living in a consumer culture involves exposure to product placement in TV-shows and films and seeing advertising, products, services, and brands in public as well as private spheres. Children come into contact with brands at home, at school, at the shopping center, on TV and on the Internet. It is important to study the relation between children and advertising in different contexts.

It is here suggested that the relation between children and advertisements should be studied in the context of commercial cultures at a cross-road where commercial and cultural phenomena intersect. Commercial culture has been conceptualized by Jackson et al. (2000) to bridge the conventional dualism between culture and

commerce. The idea is to see these as interdependent and sometimes coincident. It is of importance to explore the way people fix and negotiate relations, identities, life styles, networks etc. at the very point where consumers, retailers, and entrepreneurs interact. A complacent picture of too much harmony between the diverse actors is to be avoided consumption practices include power. If power is included there will also be responsibility and ethical judgments to consider.

Furthermore, marketing and sponsoring of school materials might influence not only children, but also their parents. Are parents victims of their children's influence or do children contribute to their parents consumer leaning by making them aware of new products and trends? Positive and negative aspects of children's influence must be considered. Also questions related to marketing ethics and consumer protection are here relevant to discuss. To what extent should marketers and consumer educators (e.g. school) be allowed to intentionally use children as gatekeepers for reaching their parents.

Different perspectives and examples of current research are presented during the lecture. The intention is not to present a unanimous answer, but to raise questions in relation to what it means to be a child in today's consumer culture. It is argued that the child is neither merely reacting upon advertising nor freely interpreting or negotiating the meaning of advertising in an isolated context. Both the advertisement and the child exist in an interrelated context representing a reciprocal process where individual, societal, as well as cultural perspectives need to be considered.